DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 027 415 VT 007 854

By-Fliegel, Frederick C.

The Low-Income Farmer in a Changing Society.

Pennsylvania State Univ., University Park. Agricultural Experiment Station.
Report No-Bull-731
Pub Date Mar 66
Note-39p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$2.05
Descriptors-Aspiration, *Farmers, *Individual Characteristics, Job Satisfaction, *Low Income, *Persistence, Social Change, *Socioeconomic Status, Theories
Identifiers-Fayette County, Pennsylvania

To identify some major differences among low-income farmers, and delineate that group representing the real core of the persistently poor, data were obtained from 189 farm operators representing a stratified random sample in Fayette County, Pennsylvania in 1957. The five main categories of individuals identified were: (1) the aged, (2) the physically handicapped, (3) the farm operator primarily oriented to non-farm opportunities, (4) the farm operator oriented to commercial agriculture, and (5) the farm operator oriented to subsistence agriculture. The characteristics of the core of low-income subsistence farmers who normally do not respond to either welfare or economic development efforts were examined in greater detail. It was found that they (1) retained traditional values while having lost many traditional subsistence skills, (2) failed to respond to greater agricultural efficiency and productivity efforts because commercial success was not highly valued, (3) placed extreme emphasis on neighborliness and friendliness as their primary goals, and (4) must respond to an attempt to change prestige orientation if their cycle of poverty is to be broken. (DM)

Bulletin 731 March 1966

The Low-Income Farmer In a Changing Society

Frederick C. Fliegel

The Pennsylvania State University
College of Agriculture Agricultural Experiment Station
University Park, Pennsylvania

Contents **Page**

The Low-Income Farmer In a Changing Society

Frederick C. Fliegel
Associate Professor of Rural Sociology

Persistent low-income conditions in certain geographic areas have been recognized and increasingly discussed in recent years. The current national efforts to alleviate poverty and, more specifically, the attention being given to the Appalachian region, reflect high public concern about chronic low-income conditions (17). Current concern is, however, only an extension and amplification of earlier concerns and action programs, and has as its basis the stubborn persistence of poverty despite concerted efforts to improve conditions. This report is a direct outgrowth of one phase in this series of efforts to find a solution to chronic low-income conditions. It will describe a sample of farm operators in a low-income county and summarize several related analyses of this sample to the end of delineating what can be thought of as the real core of low-income farmers. However, the primary concern of the report is to raise questions about the basic nature of such low-income farm people and the rural society in which they live. Persistence of the low-income farm problem indicates a need for viewing these phenomena in a nonorthodox fashion. This report is intended to indicate some of the directions which further inquiry might take to provide the knowledge needed to understand the chronic failure of some rural people to gain access to the main stream of modern industrial and commercial society.

Background of the report

In 1955 the United States Department of Agriculture published a report concerning low-income farmers which marks one in a series of steps in the history of public policy with respect to rural people (24). The report, entitled "Development of Agriculture's Human Resources," represents a departure from earlier thinking in that it made explicit a recognition of a residual element in the nation's farm population which was not sharing in the great increases in productivity experienced by the agricultural economy as a whole, and seemed unlikely to share in such growth in the future. Repeated assessments of the entire agricultural economy had revealed that some areas were consistently classified as low in income, leading to the judgement that factors other than routine market changes or technological developments were involved. Specifically, it was at least implied that the human resources—the people themselves—represented part of the low-income problem.

Emphasizing distinctions between low-income farmers and the commercial farm population probably strengthened the position of policy makers with respect to the commercial segment, and was part of a substantial effort to establish special action programs tailored to the problems of the low-income group. Pilot counties were selected in several states, including Pennsylvania, to establish trial programs to deal with the low-income problem. Research projects were also initiated in conjunction with some of the pilot action programs, to specify local problems in concrete terms and to gather information relevant to possible problem solutions (1, 14, 15, 16).

The present document is a summary report on one of the research projects undertaken in Fayette County, a low-income pilot area in Pennsylvania. Several shorter reports have been published on the work in this county (3, 4, 5). All stress the complexity of the low income problem and the difficulty of embracing this broad problem area in any single ameliorative action program. Attempts at analyzing what seemed to be distinct aspects of the low-income problem in this one county led to the general and rather negative conclusion that even those few aspects which could be studied in some detail did not fit into the broader framework of concepts which social scientists have conventionally used to assess rural society.

Most of the work of agricultural economists and rural sociologists has been oriented to the dominant group in American agriculture, the commercially successful or at least partially successful farmer, his family, and his community. Consequently, when looking in detail at

a sample of farm families who by current standards are classified as "not successful," there arose the constant vague feeling that somehow the behaviors and attitudes of these farm people could not be meaningfully described in terms of the concepts ordinarily used to deal with rural problems. This is not to imply that the low-income farmer is totally different from his commercially successful counterpart, but it is intended to say that the low-income farmer tends to fall at the extreme of many conventional measures applied to him, and that the summation of these extreme positions does not make good sense, and does not reasonably explain the observed complex of behavior.

The commercially successful farmer can be viewed as more or less closely conforming to some explicit model of economically rational behavior. Attempts to explain the behavior of the individual who deviates substantially from such a model involve the researcher in (at least implicitly) setting up non-rational models which, if he draws on the work in his field, tend to be miscellaneous collections of attributes which do not account for the fact that the individual's behavior, while not resulting in commercial success in agriculture, is apparently "reasonable" from the point of view of that individual and is, in any case, not simply random behavior. Thus, in the context of the present study, some modification of existing conceptualizations of rural society seemed to be necessary.

Research procedure

Fayette County, in southwestern Pennsylvania, borders West Virginia to the south. Because it is north of the Mason-Dixon line, it is not ordinarily included in broader studies of the southeastern mountain region. However, it shares many of the characteristics of this larger area (3). Like much of the Appalachian region, the county was designated as a low-income area by the 1955 U.S.D.A. report (24). Its basically modest soil resources and hilly terrain, plus the general decline of employment in the coal industry, have contributed to what is only the most recent chapter in a longer history of local economic uncertainty. The severity of its economic distress sets Fayette County apart from similar problem areas within Pennsylvania (8).

A random sample of noncontiguous townships was selected from the County. In order to focus on the problems and prospects of that part of the population dependent upon and actively engaged in agriculture, respondents within the sample townships were selected to exclude farm operators mainly dependent on nonfarm income and rural

residents with very small agricultural enterprises. In effect, this meant selecting only those farm operators who fit the U.S. Census Bureau definition of commercial farmers. The selection process yielded 189 individuals—slightly less than one-fourth of all commercial farmers in the County at the time the field work was done in 1957.

The Census classification of "commercial" includes many farm operators whose actual contribution to commercial channels is very small (23). Thus, even though some of the lowest-income farm residents were excluded from the sample, the average 1956 *gross* farm income for those included was roughly $3,000—low by any conventional standards. Despite the low average, there was enough variation around the average to permit comparisons between low and high extremes. These contrasts represent part of the analysis reported below.

The 189 sample farm operators were visited by trained interviewers in June, 1957. In each case, the person who made most of the farm decisions—the actual farm operator—was questioned, since much of the information sought had to do with farming operations and farm plans. The interviews usually lasted one hour, but some were longer and others shorter.

Background information as to training, occupational history, and present occupation of the various members of the farm family (including children no longer living at home) was obtained. Background information about the farm, including major changes in enterprises and amount of land in past years and plans for such changes in years ahead, was also obtained.

More-detailed information of the physical resources available to the farm operator, especially the land, was desired but could not be obtained with available research personnel and funds. Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of the study is its focus on human resources in absence of detailed information on physical resources. It has already been pointed out that Fayette County has, in general, basically modest soil resources and problems of hilly terrain. Some agriculture in the area, however, is quite competitive with that of more prosperous areas. To what extent, within the county, are physical resources limiting factors and to what extent are human resources limiting factors are two sides of the same general question. This study deals directly with only one side, however—the possible limitations in human resources.

The main part of the interview, dealing with how the respondent was then running his farm operation, included detailed questions about the use or failure to use available credit resources and a number of

farm practices recommended for the area. The over-all purpose of these questions was to gain some insight into the orientation of the respondent to farming as an occupation and to his particular farm. This report will go into some detail on what seem to be basic differences in this respect: a tendency to maximize use of available resources for productive purposes on the one hand, versus a tendency to concentrate on the immediate situation and avoid use of resources not available within the boundaries of the farm itself.

Much of the information obtained in the interview as a whole will not be itemized in the following sections. The intent of this report is to summarize and to integrate materials discussed in greater detail in earlier reports (3, 4, 5), and to raise some basic questions which may help point the way toward a more thorough understanding of the problems of chronic poverty.

The Low-Income Farmer

The average farm in the sample is a dairy farm, often with a secondary livestock or cash crop enterprise. It is not large by Pennsylvania standards, but is nevertheless of substantial size. The median farm acreage is 115, with 85 acres classified as suitable for the planting of crops. Probably the relatively hilly terrain and relatively poor soil resources are more important limiting factors than sheer farm size.

The operator of the average farm owns his land. Almost three-fourths of the sample farm operators owned all land they operate, and all but 4 per cent owned at least part of their land. About half inherited or had some family help in purchasing their farms. The average operator had been farming for 22 years, usually on the same farm. Less than one-fourth had moved from one farm to another, and the average operator was farming the same amount of land that he started with. Farm size changed little in the typical two decades of farming experience, with only a modest tendency to add additional land.

The average farm operator was 51 years old in 1957. Sixteen per cent were 65 years old or older, though still active in agriculture, and only 7 per cent were 30 years of age or younger. This means simply that the movement of young men into agriculture is relatively slow or temporary, and that older men remain active in agriculture.

The average farm operator is married and has one to two children living at home. Since he is past middle-age these children are approaching adulthood, but usually are not involved to any great extent

in the farm enterprise. The typical farm firm is basically a one-man operation with only occasional help from other family members or from hired labor. It is not unusual for children or other family members to be contributing to family income by way of off-farm work. Half of the sample families reported some income from off-farm work, but only one-fourth of the operators themselves were engaged in any such work in the year prior to the survey. Thus, discounting those families without children at home, a considerable proportion of available family labor is at least partially oriented to nonfarm work.

The average sample farmer had, in addition to the one to two still at home, one child no longer living at home. Of the children no longer at home, one-third were living in another state and one-fifth were living in another Pennsylvania county. This means that less than half (47 per cent) of the children who had left the parental home were still living in the home county at the time of the survey. Also of interest in this respect is that only 17 per cent of the farm boys who had left home were engaged in farming. The younger generation thus gives evidence of considerable mobility, both geographic and occupational, in contrast to the stable farm situation of its parents.

Age and low income

The relatively high average age among sample farm operators is not unusual in low-income farm areas. This is an aspect of this type of situation that needs special attention. In so far as there is a generalized low-income farm problem, it is suggested here that it can only be described as a problem of insufficient income, leaving the question of a standard of sufficiency and the cause or causes of any insufficiency quite open. In dealing with broad population categories it is relatively easy to sort out those families at the low end of an income distribution and label this a problem category. Even a cursory analysis of the problem category, however, reveals that the individuals or families so classified are of many different types. One of the sub-types which regularly appears is a relatively high proportion of older people whose needs for income are presumably quite different from those of younger people, especially those with young children to support (10). In the present case, 16 per cent of the sample farmers were aged 65 or over and another 12 per cent were between 60 and 65. In total, more than one of every four farmers in the sample were at or approaching retirement age, and probably should be treated separately.

Little attention has been given to the income needs of this age

group but there can be no question that, to the extent that higher incomes would be desirable, the means for providing them must be different for this age group as compared with younger people. Expansion of a farm enterprise, change in the type of occupation, or the related problem of retraining all have little meaning for the older person. Any action program directed to low-income farm people will have to treat the older group separately if it is to have meaningful impact.

From an analytical point of view, separate treatment is imperative. If one admits the possibility of different income needs for older people, the assessment of current performance must be differentiated as well. As an example, a substantial proportion of older people in a given population will affect the average income picture for that population. If one assumes lower income needs for the older group, as seems reasonable, their inclusion in the average tends to distort the total picture. For this and other reasons the present analysis has for the most part set aside the age-60-and-over group as a separate problem category.

Physical handicaps

Separate classification and analysis of the low-income farmer who is at or near retirement age involves a sorting process which may very well be arbitrary, since age is not necessarily a good index of needs or abilities, but the sorting process is at least simple. A second category of low-income farmers which probably should be distinguished for separate consideration is the physically handicapped, and here the sorting process becomes much more difficult.

In this study the farm operator was asked whether he felt he had a physical handicap which hindered him in his farm work. This is an admittedly crude procedure for identifying handicaps, but may be of some value nevertheless. Considering only those farm operators less than 60 years of age, the following items give some idea of the nature of the problem of physical handicaps: 7 per cent cited a crippling handicap such as a missing limb; another 5 per cent mentioned fairly severe handicaps such as hernia or a heart condition; and another 12 per cent listed assorted items such as arthritis, allergies, or the more-vague "bad back" type of disability.

To what extent physical handicaps are a cause of low-income cannot be determined from these data. The point is that actions to improve income must contend with the problem of handicaps. A total

of 24 per cent of those sample farmers under age 60 cite physical handicaps. If one accepts the conservative estimate that perhaps 10 to 15 per cent of this age group is substantially handicapped, then the general point is established: in addition to a sizable proportion of older farmers, the population of low-income farmers includes a minority who are physically handicapped, and attempts to improve incomes in low-income areas must contend with that fact.

It may be that the incidence of handicaps is higher in Fayette County than in other areas because of a history of some mining experience among many of the farmers. The relatively high rate of crippling accidents in the mining industry is well known. On the other hand, the County is comparable to other low-income farm areas in that most farm units are not large enough to justify two or more workers. The one-man farm enterprise requires a fairly high degree of physical capability.

Expectations for the future

Later in this report the possibility that some low-income farmers may wish to move out of agriculture is discussed in more detail. Now, however, the description of the average low-income farmer in Fayette County will be concluded with a brief examination of his immediate income expectations. The general impression of stability or even stagnation is hard to avoid in assessing responses to particular questions regarding expectations. The average respondent reported no substantial change in family income in the 5 years preceding the survey, and almost two-thirds expected income to remain stable or go down in the immediate future.

Responses to another question support the absence of expectations that the income situation might improve. Eighty-three per cent of the sample expressed the opinion that they themselves were doing about as well as or better than most other farmers in the area. This does not mean that sample farmers are fully satisfied with their returns from agriculture, but it does imply that they consider current performance to be acceptable. The best available yardstick of performance is the performance of one's peers, and only a minority of the respondents perceive themselves as performing less well than their peers. In part this response pattern is a function of sampling, in that some of the smallest and least remunerative farms were excluded from consideration, i.e. the sample was restricted to commercial farms. By local standards, then, a rather high degree of satisfaction with existing

circumstances might be expected. The difficulty is that by the standards of the larger society a problem situation exists, and local complacency is not consistent with efforts to solve the problem. The substantial divergence between local standards and those of the larger society represents a serious obstacle to bringing about change.

In the next section of this report (pages 11 to 17) some pointed questions are raised about farmers' aspirations and their plans for the future. The general impression of stability is more narrowly specified as probably applying to another sub-type of low-income farmer, rather than to the group as a whole. A distinction is made between what seem to be essentially commercial-farm oriented farm operators, a second and similar category of commercially oriented men who are presently farming but who are inclined toward nonfarm job alternatives, and a third group who have no intention of leaving the farm and can be described as having a subsistence orientation to agriculture. It is this last group, the subsistence oriented, who give the strongest impression of stability and who seem to fit least well into current sociological conceptions of rural society (27). It is in this connection that questions about the adequacy of these concepts are raised.

Income Aspirations of Low-Income Farmers

From the viewpoint of the sociologist, usually one of the first questions to be raised in the study of low-income people, farm or nonfarm, is that of their orientation to income goals. In terms of the larger society certain income levels are defined as undesirably low and currently this value judgement is often coupled with some effort to raise these incomes. The establishing of economic opportunities is usually based on the premise that the individual defined as low in income will take some action to benefit from the opportunity. Past behavior patterns are by definition less than adequate, since they failed to produce what is judged to be sufficient income. Therefore, some change in behavior patterns is called for.

The preceding statements, seemingly obvious, are presented at some length because the implicit statement of a problem is often obscured by adherence to the general proposition that everyone is oriented to income goals—that is "everyone wants to make money." This proposition, while probably true, completely misses the point. Quite simply, orientation to economic reward varies; some people are

more strongly oriented than others in this direction. In the case of low-income farmers, intensity of orientation to income goals becomes particularly important because ameliorative programs in the past have concentrated upon providing means to higher incomes, yet the problem has persisted. On purely empirical grounds then, if inadequate income cannot be totally attributed to absence of means, the order of priority assigned to income-improving programs merits explicit consideration.

Up to this point, the definition of a maximally intense or exclusive orientation to improvement of income, if such can be said to exist, has been quite vague. The underlying notion is that "rational" action will be directed to maximizing economic returns. The term "rational" is defined as consisting of weighing alternative ends, means to those ends, and the secondary consequences of choosing given means or ends, all such weighing of alternatives being conducted with the objective of maximizing economic gain (7).

The intensity of a low-income farmer's orientation to income goals is not easy to assess, because any given act may have meaning with reference to a variety of goals. Acquiring a highly productive dairy cow, for example, may involve a farmer's desire to provide for his family. The economic implications of providing for the family are obvious, but the possibility of a confounding between an economic orientation and a noneconomic orientation to his family, such as trying to encourage a son to become a farmer, also exists. It may be that the farmer is actually most interested in the performance of his dairy herd from the point of view of his neighbors' evaluation of that performance. Acquisition of a productive animal again has direct economic significance, but in this case is more meaningful in terms of local prestige. Further areas of meaning might be listed, all relevant to the same act and all involving an orientation to economic gain, but at the same time illustrating the difficulty of drawing a clear line between an abstract orientation to maximizing profits and a variety of related orientations. In the present study an index of the level (intensity) of income aspirations was devised. Hopefully, it avoids some of the complexities of different meanings associated with the same concrete act.

Measuring income aspirations

It should be apparent from the preceding discussion that one would not necessarily expect specific examples of human behavior to conform completely to the model of economically rational action. The

question becomes: to what extent will given individuals conform to or deviate from the model of economic rationality, at least in those action choices having apparent profit or loss implications?

Fayette County respondents were confronted with a statement about making considerably more money than they were currently making, then presented a series of possible blocks to choosing the higher income alternative. The intent was to present an unambiguous economic goal—high income—independent of the means for achieving that higher income. The sample farmers were then asked to respond to those blocks that would prevent their choosing a higher income, and were scored on the number of such blocks which would stop them from making the hypothetical choice for higher income. It was assumed that if none of the blocks stood in the way of the higher income choice, the respondent showed a maximum of aspiration for higher income. If, on the other hand, the person considered most or all of the hypothetical blocks as reasons for not making the choice, his income aspiration was assumed to be at a minimum. The complete question is as follows (19):

> Suppose you were offered a chance to make a lot more money than you're making now. Tell me whether these things would or would not stop you from accepting this offer. Suppose that it involved:
>
> 1. Endangering your health.
> 2. Leaving your family for some time.
> 3. Moving around the country a lot (with your family).
> 4. Leaving your community.
> 5. Giving up your spare time.
> 6. Taking on more responsibility in decisions than you have now.
> 7. Changing to a different type of farming.
> 8. Changing to an occupation other than farming.
> 9. Taking on a substantial debt.
> 10. Having a sale.

Three responses were possible for each item. These were (1) "Would stop me," (2) "I'd be on the fence," and (3) "Would not stop me." The last two responses were coded together as representing a neutral position in contrast to the response indicating that the item would stop the respondent from taking the opportunity. The percentage of respondents giving a neutral response on any given item ranged from about 15 to almost 70 per cent.

Neutral and negative responses were arbitrarily given weights of one and zero respectively, to combine the items into an index. The

percentage of respondents neutral on a given item was plotted against an index score based on the remaining nine items (3). Two of the items—taking on more responsibility and changing to a different type of farming—showed a tendency to be erratic as measuring devices. It is possible that the relative ambiguity of these items accounts for the irregular response patterns. In any case, the measure used in the analysis is based on the remaining eight items.

The index of income aspiration does not completely avoid the possibility of a confounding between purely monetary and related orientations. The several items were selected on the basis of a pretest and therefore assumed to be relevant to respondents. Items were arranged into a sequence which left the nature of the hypothetical chance to make more money as open at the outset as possible. Farmer respondents could answer in terms of a variety of farm and nonfarm occupational alternatives. Giving up farming was intentionally introduced late in the series of items, but remains the most obvious confounding element. It should be noted that in some of the applications of the index, where it seemed possible that the index might be directly measuring a desire to leave farming, the item explicitly referring to this possibility was dropped from the index and the particular tests were repeated with no change in results. Thus, although the index could undoubtedly be improved, it is used with considerable confidence in this analysis as a measure of intensity of orientation to a higher income level.

Income aspirations and farm versus nonfarm alternatives

The sample of farmers was questioned about returns from farming, plans for the farm enterprise, and involvement in nonfarm employment. Respondents were arranged from low to high on the index of income aspiration. A cross-classification with the indicated factors was then made to determine whether differences in level of aspiration were associated with differences in performance and orientation. Results of the analysis are shown in detail in Table 1.

It was expected that relatively high levels of income aspiration would be associated with relatively high levels of performance in agriculture, but this was not the case. There was no indication among respondents that higher income aspiration led to their adopting recommended practices, or that higher income aspiration contributed to greater contact with the Extension Service, a major source of information about modern farm practices.

The absence of any tendency for those highest in aspiration to have higher contact with the Extension Service or to be more likely to accept recommended farm practices is consistent with the lack of a tendency for the same group to have plans for changes on their farms. Respondents were asked to cite whatever plans they had for changes on their farms in the ensuing 2 to 3 years. Specific questions were asked about changes with respect to land, buildings, particular enterprises, and equipment. Farmers who planned to retire were excluded from this phase of the analysis. Very few respondents mentioned plans for land acquisition or disposal, therefore no analysis could be made on this point. Substantial minorities did mention plans for positive changes in their buildings and their various enterprises, but the existence of such plans was not associated with scores on the index of income aspiration. Finally, with respect to equipment, those highest in income aspiration were significantly less likely to have positive plans regarding farm equipment than were those low in aspiration.

Higher aspiration levels were associated with involvement in off-farm employment and, as just mentioned, with a generally negative orientation to agriculture. Respondents with higher income aspirations were *not* more likely to have higher gross farm incomes or larger farms. They were, however, significantly more likely to have received some income from nonfarm sources in the year preceding the survey, and they were also more likely to have received larger amounts of any such incomes. Nonfarm work was the sole source of additional income for over 70 per cent of the respondents reporting off-farm income, therefore a positive relationship between relatively high income aspiration and nonfarm employment seems to be indicated.

Looking at the reverse grouping, the fact that respondents ranking low in income aspiration were more likely to be planning equipment purchases implies both a desire to remain in agriculture and, in at least a limited sense, an aggressive orientation to that future in agriculture. The existence of positive plans is a very minimal indication of an aggressive approach to a given objective, and especially so in this case since it is only with respect to equipment that the farmer who is low in income aspiration is more likely to have made plans. The implication is, nevertheless, that the respondent who ranks low in income aspiration is oriented to agriculture, while his high-ranking counterpart tends to be oriented to nonfarm opportunities. The implication and its importance to agriculture will be explored in greater detail in the following section. For the moment it is sufficient to point

TABLE 1. *Summary of analysis with respect to income aspirations, with direction of association indicated where apparent.**

Income aspiration and:	Probability	Direction
(1) Size of farm business		
Gross farm income	.30	
Number of crop acres	.30	
(2) Off-farm employment		
Presence of off-farm income	.05	+
Amount of off-farm income	.05	+
(3) Orientation to agriculture		
Adoption of practices †	.30	
Contact with Extension Service	.20	
Plans for farm: Buildings	.30	
Enterprises	.50	
Equipment	.05	−
Plans to stay in farming	.05	−
Farm life is best life	.20	−
Would go into farming again	.01	−

* Chi-square was used for all tests with $p = .05$ as the critical level of significance. Direction of association was determined by inspection.
† Measured by an index based on six crop and livestock practices recommended by the Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service of The Pennsylvania State University.

out (Table 1) that both aspects of the implication are supported by the responses to direct questions about respondents' orientations to agriculture. Farmers ranking low in income aspiration were significantly more likely to plan to remain in agriculture, tended to agree that farm life is the best life, and were significantly more likely to indicate that they would go into farming again if such a choice could be made.

The indicated association between relatively high levels of income aspiration and orientation to nonfarm job opportunities is by no means close. The several bits of evidence have been cited to support the idea that efforts to improve the low income situation in an area such as Fayette County require special attention for the farm operator who is oriented toward nonfarm opportunities.

Recognition of this phenomenon does sometimes occur and is in itself no panacea. In other words, perhaps the biggest single obstacle to capitalizing on a nonfarm orientation, thereby helping to improve the income situation of at least part of the low-income population by encouraging nonfarm employment, is that nonfarm jobs are not always plentiful. Fayette County has in recent years been distinguished by an unemployment rate ranging around 25 per cent of the labor force. Neighboring counties, including the industrial complex of Pittsburgh,

have also suffered serious unemployment (8). Added to this are certain nonfacilitating personal qualities of the respondents. The average sample farmer had 8 years of formal education, somewhat less than the national average. Only 8 per cent of the total had more than a high school education and an equal proportion had 4 years of formal schooling or less. In view of the relatively small proportion with any high school training (38 per cent), it is not surprising that the incidence of vocational training is low. Only 17 per cent of the sample had some formal vocational training for nonagricultural jobs. Coupled with the low level of general education, this means that alternative opportunities in nonagricultural pursuits would be limited. While 81 per cent of the sample did have some nonfarm job experience, most of this experience was in unskilled jobs and much of it was in mining. The job market in the mining industry has been sharply curtailed in recent decades and the demand for unskilled workers in many industries has been declining, so one can infer that much of the nonfarm work experience has no practical relevance in terms of present alternative job opportunities. In general, while 73 per cent of the sample farm operators under 60 years of age intend to remain in agriculture, their alternatives would be quite limited if they did seek other employment.

For purposes of this report the general point is not the assessment of whether the Fayette County farmers with high income aspirations might be aided in one way or another, but rather to point out that the combination of relatively high income aspirations with a nonfarm orientation everywhere constitutes a fairly distinct problem category within the broad grouping of low-income farmers, a category which needs to be recognized and dealt with separately if changes are to be brought about.

Some Characteristics of Respondents Who Intend to Continue as Farmers

To say that high income aspiration is associated with a nonfarm job orientation is not to say that all of the sample members who intend to continue farming are devoid of such aspirations. As previously indicated, the association is not close. This section of the report is restricted to 96 respondents—those who are under 60 years of age and plan to continue farming. Some had high income aspirations, while many had lower aspirations. In order to take a closer look at the prob-

lems and prospects of those who intend to remain farmers, the respondents were ranked on total family income and the distribution was divided at the median into low and high income groups. For purposes of analysis the top group in the income distribution was designated as commercially oriented, and the lower group as subsistence oriented. The top group by definition tends towards the commercial since farm sales are higher, and the reverse holds for the lower group. Comparisons were then made between the two groups to determine whether the respondents' actions and attitudes actually reflected commercial or subsistence orientations to agriculture. In general the data are consistent with the preliminary, arbitrary designation.

Some of the factors considered to be part of a subsistence farming orientation are extreme familism, avoidance of debt, low value placed on formal education, and an emphasis placed on leisure—all of which can be viewed as obstacles to increasing income (13). The data reported here do not provide the complete profile of value orientations necessary to characterize a subsistence farming subculture. There is sufficient information, however, to analyze two rather crucial categories of variables which are subsumed under the following propositions: those farm operators who are lowest in income (i) will tend to be oriented to the present rather than the future, and (ii) will tend to be passive with respect to the problems of mastering the environment in which they live (9). Higher-income respondents, in contrast, are expected to be less inclined to live on a day-to-day basis and less inclined simply to endure a given lot in life. Planning and willingness to try to control circumstances are both viewed, of course, as important to achieving success in commercial agriculture.

Subsistence farmers as a distinct group

As indicated earlier (page 15), sample farm operators were asked about plans for changes on their farms. Responses to these same questions were also used in this portion of the analysis. Almost all respondents mentioned at least one project under consideration—ranging from sheer maintenance (such as painting a barn) to complete revision of the farming program. As expected, lower-income respondents mentioned fewer plans for the future than those higher in income (Table 2). Similarly, when those respondents aged 50 to 59 were questioned about retirement plans, a much higher proportion of those with higher incomes had made definite plans in this direction. In both cases there was a significant relationship between family income and

TABLE 2. *Summary of comparisons between income groups.*

	% of respondents with total family income	
	below median (N=43)	above median (N=53)
	per cent	
(1) Plans for future:		
Four or more changes planned for farm	21	40
Definite retirement plans (age 50-59 only)	30	64
(2) Behaviors and attitudes relevant to control of environment:		
Borrowed to buy land	19	68
Used production credit	30	55
Favorable attitude toward credit	19	34
Above median in adoption of farm practices	44	67
Favorable attitude toward science	47	77
Obtained farm information from professional source in past year	26	49
Moved since starting to farm*	26	21
Favorable attitude toward moving*	24	28
Added cropland since starting to farm†	40	55

* Difference not significant.
† $P < .10$. Unless otherwise indicated all differences are significant at at least the 5 per cent level by chi-square test.

the presence of plans for the future, thus supporting the first proposition that low-income respondents are oriented to the present. Differences in propensity to project plans into the future, one might add, are not a function of farm tenancy. Only two respondents in this subsample were tenants, both were in the low-income group, but both planned more farm changes than the sample average. Being under age 50, they were not asked the question on retirement plans.

A variety of behavioral and attitudinal data was used to test the second proposition. In general it was expected that low-income respondents would be less likely to give evidence of behavior or attitudes reflecting positive efforts to control existing circumstances. For example, responses to questions about borrowing money for farm purposes showed that less than one-third of the low-income group had ever borrowed money to buy land or supplies and equipment to be used in the production process (Table 2). The majority of the higher-income respondents had at one time or another borrowed capital.

If low-income respondents have used credit less in the past, it

should follow that they tend to reject the use of credit in the present. It is noteworthy that the bulk of the entire sample expressed rather conservative attitudes toward the use of credit. Nevertheless (Table 2), a larger proportion of the higher-income group expressed a favorable attitude toward credit use than was the case for the low-income group. However, a further question as to whether a farmer could expect to succeed without using credit showed both income groups taking the position that credit is necessary for success. Thus it seems that these respondents, particularly the low-income group, recognize a need for credit but are not necessarily willing to use it themselves. Recognition of the need for credit is underscored by the fact that lack of money was cited as the main obstacle for 52 per cent of the changes in farm operation planned by the low-income group. Lack of capital was advanced as a factor for 32 per cent of the improvements planned by the higher-income group. In general the responses to questions concerning credit lead to the conclusion that the low-income respondents are less inclined to see credit as a useful adjunct to their own farming efforts.

Adoption of recommended farm practices is another key means of gaining greater control over existing circumstances. Income groups were compared on an index of adoption of six currently recommended practices. As expected, low-income respondents had adopted fewer of the practices (Table 2). Low adoption implies a rejection of the wealth of modern knowledge which is available to the farmer, an implication which becomes even more clear when the data on information sources and on attitude toward applying science to agriculture are analyzed. Table 2 shows that low-income respondents were less likely to agree that the scientific method could be useful to the farmer, and were consistent in that they were also less likely to have obtained information from the county agent and other professional information sources during the year preceding the survey.

Finally, responses to several questions regarding geographical mobility were analyzed. It was felt that, in addition to manipulating existing resources by using the best available farming techniques, there are undoubtedly situations in which moving to an entirely different farm or at least adding more land to a farm are expedient if an optimum farming operation is to be achieved. The data on actual movement from farm to farm and on attitude toward moving (Table 2) reveal no differences between the income groups. The high-income respondent is no more likely to have moved or be favorable to

moving than one lower in income, but he is somewhat more likely to have enlarged his farm by buying or renting additional cropland. It is possible that moving to a different farm may not be a reasonable alternative to a farmer in Fayette County in that better farms may not be available. In any case relatively few respondents, regardless of income, have used this approach to gaining greater control over circumstances.

These data show that low-income respondents are less likely to project plans into the future and are less likely to utilize such key means as credit and modern farming information and practices to gain control over circumstances. No difference was found between income groups with regard to movement from farm to farm. If the low-income respondent is to improve his returns from agriculture, the observed tendencies will represent serious obstacles. There are, of course, other differences between the two groups. For example, the low-income category averages 46 years of age, while those in the upper group average 41 years. The important point, demonstrated in the preceding analysis, is the relative absence of a commercial approach to agriculture. At the very least, these findings mean that any substantial increase in income for the lower-income farmer who expects to remain in agriculture will require some quite basic changes in attitudes and values. This is the farm operator who most clearly demonstrates the stability, the changelessness, which characterizes to some extent the entire study population.

Farm operators who demonstrate a commercial approach to agriculture but have modest resources will undoubtedly face serious problems in a rapidly changing agricultural economy. Their problems will be minor, however, in comparison to the farmer with a subsistence orientation. The traditional programs of the Extension Service and other agencies are well designed to help the commercially oriented, and this is a big advantage. On the other hand, these same programs can have little meaning for or impact upon the farm operator who lives on a day-to-day basis and is resigned to his fate. It is here contended that the latter category—the subsistence oriented low-income farmer—is the least well understood of the complex of subgroups within the general "low-income farmer" classification. Five such subgroups have been pointed out: the older age group, the physically handicapped, the operator with relatively high but nonfarm income aspirations, the commercial-farm oriented, and finally the subsistence oriented.

In the next section of the report some broader considerations are introduced which may lead to a clearer understanding of the farmer who apparently does not fit into a commercially oriented society. This subgroup is stressed because of the implication that a subsistence orientation is likely to perpetuate the low-income phenomenon. It is the chronic nature of poverty that is being examined, not the temporary stress situation.

Societal Change and Subsistence Agriculture

To the extent that a subsistence orientation to agriculture is a distinct and identifiable phenomenon on the current rural scene it is possible to think of the phenomenon as a carryover from the past. It is a fact that the pioneer in much of rural America was primarily concerned with deriving food, fiber, and shelter from his own farm and may or may not have produced a modest surplus for sale, assuming that he even had access to a market for his product. It is equally true that many contemporary rural people who are classified as farmers by various agencies and organizations market a quantity of product which is quite small and in this respect are at least superficially comparable to the pioneer.

The very fact that a contemporary low-production and low-income farmer is thought of in problem terms implies one major difference between the subsistence farming pioneer and the subject of current study. The pioneer may have been poor by modern standards, but this was not a problem in the context of the times. Pioneer subsistence farmers are not and were not in the past labelled as problem cases for two related reasons. First, the subsistence farmer of the past had skills appropriate to a level of living reasonably close to the relatively low standard of an earlier time period; and second, the American standard of living has risen sharply over time. Modern subsistence-oriented farmers no longer have the food processing, clothing production, and other skills which permitted the pioneer to live, and do not produce enough for the market to be able to buy the goods and services needed for subsistence at a level even remotely approaching the higher modern standard of living.

Low production in a market economy is not the same as home production of the necessities of life. From this point of view, the farmer designated as subsistence-oriented in a contemporary low-income agricultural setting cannot be viewed as a reflection of the

past. From a broader point of view, however, it can be argued that the long-term historical trend toward increased control over nature and more complex division of labor (which permits a high living standard) has produced casualties. Some individuals and groups have been unwilling or unable to make the transition to contemporary forms of social and economic organization. Some rural people, and some urbanites as well, can be viewed as being in a transitional state between the old and the new, with many subsistence skills obviously lost but apparently not replaced by abilities to earn enough in a more specialized economy to permit buying the goods and services considered necessary. If this is the case, then it becomes quite important *to go beyond simply describing the abilities which are apparently lacking to an understanding of whatever abilities are present and operative in contemporary life.* The possibility of *some* carry-over of traditional attitudes and orientations is the most logical area for exploration and has led, in the present study, to some questions about existing conceptions of traditional rural society.

Some weaknesses in broad social change theories

It is difficult to characterize social phenomena over time. We are currently very conscious of change but have little concrete information about any time period (except the present) against which to characterize whatever alterations have taken place. Perhaps the most common device used to overcome this difficulty is to try to describe in hypothetical terms two or more points in an assumed time sequence, and then classify phenomena of interest in terms of resemblance to or deviation from these points. This procedure overcomes ignorance about the past only in the sense that it represents a first step in imposing at least a tentative order on the scattered information available. Schemes to describe broad socio-economic change processes have been advanced for generations and are still popular. An example is Rostow's description of stages of economic growth (20).

Essential as it is to impose some order on the miscellaneous information available about long-term change processes, the theories of steps or stages have little to offer in understanding why a given group or society is at one stage rather than another, and how advancement from one stage to another can be brought about.

Substantial amounts of information about the rural society of the present are available, especially those aspects which seem to be consistent with changes in society as a whole. Most of the research

efforts of agricultural economists and rural sociologists are devoted to the commercial farmer and his problems. It cannot be said that even the commercial-farm segment of contemporary rural society is completely understood, but knowledge of the past is unquestionably much less complete. Efforts to understand some aspects of the current scene which may bear a resemblance to the past, such as the subsistence-oriented farmer, are thus hampered.

One variant of the numerous sets of propositions about long-run social change which has particularly influenced rural sociologists is the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology utilized by Loomis and Beegle (12). This typology does not posit steps or stages in the change process but serves the same purpose by more or less clearly characterizing the two temporal extremes of the same general change process. If some point in the past and a second point in the present or future can be specified in hypothetical terms, concrete information about particular societal phenomena can then be classified as falling at some point between the two extremes.

For present purposes, the major problem involved in utilizing either step theories or polar type theories of change stems directly from the relative absence of data from any past time period. In a situation in which our knowledge of the present is relatively complete and our major purpose really is to explain in even greater detail some current phenomenon, it is very tempting to hypothesize past states and forms of relevant variables as essentially reverse images of the variables as seen at the present. If one can characterize a current state of affairs by the terms "X" and "Y," for example, the easiest, although not necessarily the most useful, characterization of a prior state would be "not X" and "not Y." Thus one can describe a traditional rural society as "not commercially oriented," a description which offers no clue as to the orientations which were operative. Substituting the positive expression, "subsistence oriented," is a standard procedure but is intellectually frustrating since there is often little more than a verbal transformation involved.

The core of the difficulty, as here perceived, lies in the fact that the term "commercial orientation" describes a central and dynamic theme in contemporary society; the term helps to organize thinking about, if not explain, the functioning of a society. In contrast, the term "subsistence oriented" is a very truncated, minimal proposition since it describes only the basic fact that man desires to maintain his life; it does not begin to explain the dynamics of a society. It can be

argued that traditional societies were in fact static, thus the quest for an explanatory dynamic theme may be obviated. The assumption of a prior static state is not consistent with fact, however, except in a *relative* sense, and for that reason the absence of a dynamic, explanatory element in the term "subsistence orientation," cannot be tolerated.

Gemeinschaft and gesellschaft

Even though polar types or postulated steps involve certain problems in analyzing change over time, it does not mean that such schemes should be abandoned. There is general agreement that coherent long term changes have taken place and are reflected in such terms as urbanization, industrialization, and recognition of the growing importance of science. Exactly how the trend or trends can be characterized remains problematical and is the subject of discussion here. The gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology is used to focus the discussion because it has considerable currency among rural sociologists, and not because it is notably better or worse than a number of similar conceptualizations.

That aspect of the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology which is of greatest immediate concern is the manner in which incentives and peoples' reactions to incentives are characterized. A gesellschaft type of society, or group within a society, involves an emphasis on rational action in the same sense in which that term has been used in earlier sections of this report. One might say, in a farming context, that profit is not only valued but that actions tend to be so oriented as to maximize profit, with the result that personal relationships tend to be structured in terms of their relevance to commercial objectives. In the older, gemeinschaft type of society, on the other hand, economic gain may be valued but human actions are not necessarily so oriented as to maximize profits and human relationships tend to be valued as ends in themselves (12). The implication, although not always clear, is that a major incentive in traditional societies is the establishment and maintenance of rewarding human relationships, and that this type of incentive has been at least partially replaced in modern times by a desire for gain, with a consequent subjugation or restructuring of human relationships in terms of material ends.

The general idea that traditional human society was characterized by a relatively high emphasis on human relationships as ends in themselves is a very old and a widely shared idea. Another way of expressing the same idea is to single out the emotional, or affective,

aspect of human ties as against the rational or instrumental. This report cannot document in detail the many forms which the idea has taken and its current popularity. Suffice it to say that the theme of a past state in which affective ties were of primary importance is a recurrent theme in religious thought over the ages, is of major importance in the writings of social philosophers in recent centuries, and is a dominant theme in descriptions of American rural society of even a few decades ago. James Mickel Williams, for example, in writing about the rural society from which he stemmed, repeatedly uses such terms as generosity, helpfulness, neighborliness, friendliness, and so on, to contrast traditional rural society with the impersonality of life in the growing urban centers (26).

To what extent is it accurate to describe traditional rural society in terms of human relationships as ends in themselves? This is obviously a difficult question, in view of the dearth of concrete information about the past. For present purposes the accuracy and therefore the utility of emphasis on relationships as ends in themselves is questioned on two points. First, the explicit emphasis on affective ties often involves an implicit emphasis on positive affect to the exclusion of negative affect and conflict. Unless there were grounds for assuming a change in human nature over time it does not seem reasonable to characterize traditional societies as involving friends and good neighbors but not enemies, solid kin groups but no feuds, and so on. And second, modern sociology is full of assorted "rediscoveries" of the primary group (in which affective ties are of major importance) in urban neighborhoods, the extended family in suburbia, and the closely knit work group in the bureaucratic factory, leading to a general suspicion that the line between traditional and contemporary forms of social organization has been overdrawn.

The gemeinschaft and conflict

It is quite striking that reports on the traditional rural community make very little mention of friction, competitive behavior, or open conflict of any kind. A rather idyllic picture is usually presented, featuring people who at least tolerate one another, who generously give food and shelter to anyone who asks, and who lead simple and peaceful lives. Sharp dealings and interpersonal conflict may also be reported but tend to be treated as aberrations, becoming integral aspects of human society only with the emergence of urban, gesellschaft-like society. The net result is a characterization of traditional rural

society as relatively devoid of any incentives which might lead to differentiation among people. The same question which was raised with respect to the contemporary subsistence-oriented farmer is raised here at a more general level. If financial incentives do not seem to be important, then what is it that incites people to take action? Or is it a fact that traditional society was devoid of all but minimal biological incentives and thus undifferentiated and static?

Without data, the truth or falsity of the idyllic characterization of rural society of the past cannot be established. It is here assumed that the stress on friendship and peacefulness may be inaccurate; several explanations are offered for the emergence of such a view and, in a later section, an alternative explanation is presented.

With specific reference to the gemeinschaft concept, it is quite possible that conflict is underemphasized for the simple reason that F. Toennies, who originated the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology, explicitly omitted conflict from consideration (22). He did not personally approve of conflict and chose to ignore it, a position which has particular relevance for his conception of the gemeinschaft because the impersonality of human relationships at the opposite extreme, in the gesellschaft, at least implicitly permits interpersonal conflict to be considered. Toennies' failure to include conflict in his stock of sociological concepts can hardly explain a subsequent failure to either reject the typology he proposed or at least to modify it in this respect. In any case, the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology is only one of a variety of similar analytical devices which tend to be equally oblivious of conflict, especially when referring to society at some earlier time.

Loomis' English translation of Toennies' work was published in 1940 and at that time many sociologists were preoccupied with the growth of the metropolis, the absorption of immigrants into the American city, the phenomenon of the slum, and so on. The balance between rural and urban segments of the population was quickly swinging toward the urban and efforts were made to explain the new phenomenon—the metropolis—along with the passing of the old rural way of life. Concern over the problematic aspects of urban growth led to an overstatement of the supposedly unique aspects of life in the metropolis, and subsequent idealization of rural life. If the urban worker was seen as an impersonal cog in a large bureaucratic system, devoid of affective ties to his fellow man, and this was a new development, then the traditional farmer must have been characterized by the opposite. In absence of comparative data, the disturb-

ing aspects of urban society led to retrospective characterizations of rural society which were essentially reverse images of that which was seen as pathological in the city.

Another factor which helps to account for what are here suggested as being distorted views of past rural society has to do with the criteria used to assess differentiation among people. As stated, idyllic descriptions of traditional rural society stress affective orientations of a positive nature, such as neighborliness and friendliness. This implies a relative absence of differentiation in a hierarchical sense. Now, in an industrial society, the whole idea of social structure and the individual's position or chances of achieving a particular position in that structure, are inextricably interwoven with activity in the economy. In a subsistence context, in which activity in the economy is by definition less differentiated, it is to be expected that differences among people with respect to occupation, income, and other economically related variables will be minor. A common conclusion derived from the foregoing is that the traditional rural society was not characterized by *any* substantial differentiation of a hierarchical nature, except for certain inherited differences such as membership in a particular family. Such a conclusion may be valid, but the evidence is far from conclusive.

The possibility of error stems from the failure to distinguish between hierarchical aspects of social structure, as such, and the value basis for hierarchical ordering at any given point in time. A relative absence of economically based differences in a subsistence-oriented society only specifies the obvious and tends to draw attention away from possible differentiation on other grounds and thus from competition and conflict closely related to differentiation, again excluding from consideration inherited differences.

The gesellschaft and rational economic action

About the time that Toennies' gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology appeared in English translation, a few social scientists started to have serious second thoughts about the urban society which had been viewed as a quite novel and more or less pathological manifestation of man's social life. Anthropologists studying social relationships in a large factory were surprised to find among workers close personal relationships which were not part of the formal organizational scheme. In some instances, the relationships were inimical to the rational production process, which had supposedly eliminated such kinds of relation-

ships from modern society (21). Urban sociologists were beginning to raise questions about the supposed absence of intimate, face-to-face contacts among people living near one another in the metropolis (18). More recently, students of the family have begun to revise prevailing ideas about the disappearance of the extended family in an urban society (11).

In general, contemporary sociologists have become more cautious than their immediate forebears in ascribing impersonal and coldly rational action patterns to modern, urban man. Granted that some change in the nature of human relationships has taken place in the process of urbanization, the change is probably less radical and complete than had been supposed.

One of the most pervasive influences on contemporary thought about man's reactions to incentives of various kinds is the work of Thorstein Veblen (25). His "The Theory of Leisure Class" was published just before the turn of the 20th Century and in a gradual and fairly subtle way has influenced not only economic thought but the social sciences in general (25). Many of Veblen's specific ideas are of lesser interest in the present context than are his broad questions about the supposed rationality of action in the economic sphere in modern society. By arguing that display of possessions was an important incentive for at least part of society, Veblen was in agreement with general thought about the greater impersonality of human relationships in modern society. But he was sharply at variance with those who claimed to recognize a shift to direct and rational response to the possibility of maximizing financial gain.

Veblen was also inclined to idealize past societal forms, but by raising basic questions about the society of his own time, he stimulated much questioning of the somewhat mechanistic models widely used to assess it. With specific reference to the gesellschaft construct, it can be said that the raising of questions about man's rationality in economic pursuits has a very salutary effect, providing a way of refining the construct.

A given construct or model, such as Toennies' gesellschaft construct, is not intended to be and should not be an exact reflection of the real world. The utility of the model lies in its providing a point of reference with which the real world in all its complexity can be compared. Deviations from the fixed point of reference permit arranging data from the real world. There must, however, be some objective probability that the various elements in the model *could* be found

in the real world. Otherwise, the model loses its value as a reference point. If the gesellschaft model and our concepts of modern society in general are tempered by inclusion of incentives other than maximization of profit, the model corresponds somewhat more closely to the real world and its utility as a point of reference is thereby increased.

To the extent that conceptualizations of contemporary society can be clarified, it also becomes possible to reconstruct past states of society with greater clarity. Granted that reconstruction of the past—in terms of mirror-images of the present—is a perilous procedure, the fact is that detailed knowledge of the past is lacking. Reconstruction of "what was" will have to depend heavily on knowledge of "what is," therefore the possibility of blind spots and distortions in the "mirror" is of the first order of importance.

Suggested Conceptual Revisions

The immediate problem is to gain a greater degree of insight into the workings of those segments of society involved in a subsistence approach to agriculture. The low-production and low-income farmer in some sections of the United States, as well as peasant farmers in many other parts of the world, are ordinarily viewed as carriers of an older tradition. Starting with the obvious absence of a rational approach to economic objectives, the existing conceptual descriptions of traditional rural society tend to specify only the incentives which are not operative. Unless one assumes that traditional society functioned with no more than the minimum incentives necessary for maintenance of life and was therefore static (a position true only in a relative sense), the conventional views of traditional society are of little help in dealing with the low-income situation.

The practical objective behind all of this discussion is that change must be encouraged. A wealthy society will not tolerate poverty in some of its segments and an underdeveloped society is oriented toward increasing agricultural production as a key element in its general development. If one assumes some degree of dynamism in a traditional rural society (and logic demands that one must), then an understanding of that dynamism makes a great deal of sense if further change is to be introduced.

Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous giving

C. J. Erasmus, a cultural anthropologist, recently published a

study in which he modified and extended some of Veblen's ideas (2). He suggests one important dynamic theme which may explain the relative lack of emphasis on pursuit of economic gain and at the same time provide a key to the understanding of change in the traditional rural society.

Erasmus begins with the familiar idea that the accumulation and display of material goods can be a powerful incentive to economic achievement. The basis for such an incentive, he argues, lies in the common human need for man to differentiate himself from his fellows, to be recognized, and to maximize his standing in society. From this point of view, rational economic activity is a means to competitive accumulation and display of goods and command over services; the desire for economic gain is seen as relevant to the broader objective of maximizing prestige.

Erasmus argues that in the traditional society, on the other hand, the same basic human need for recognition is also operative but in a different form. Given severe limitations on the availability of durable goods, the desire for differentiation may take the form of competitive distribution of the goods that are available. In subsistence terms, food and shelter may be shared on a competitive basis, as paradoxical as this may sound. Prevailing ideas about hospitality, generosity, and so on, as characteristics of the traditional rural society, are here viewed from a different perspective. It suggests that recognition may be derived from such sharing—that prestige can be enhanced by giving at this elementary level. Human relationships may be emphasized not only as ends in themselves but as means to further ends and, beyond this, may be actively manipulated in order to maximize prestige.

The idea of conspicuous giving as an element of traditional rural society has substantial implications for the functioning of an economy. First, in terms of direct incentives to maximize production, the items which are shared may be of such a nature as to effectively place a ceiling on production. Many foods, for example, are sufficiently perishable so that even a strong emphasis on direct sharing would not necessarily prompt an individual to achieve high food production, since the foods could not be held long enough to permit other than limited, immediate distribution. And second, the functioning of any incentive involves a psychological aspect—a direct relationship between individual feeling states and objectives for action—and a closely related social aspect. Human beings respond to the expectations of others. Accounts of traditional rural societies contain many references

to expectations that hospitality be extended, for example, as well as reference to negative sanctions regarding accumulation of scarce goods (26). These societal sanctions, both positive and negative, serve to impose a ceiling on production levels.

Returning to contemporary industrial society, the effect of others' expectations in this case is to reinforce an emphasis on accumulation and consumption. The accent in modern society is on emulation of those who have maximum access to goods and services, while negative sanctions are applied to those who have least. Wealth, not poverty, describes the blessed state. The key variable in this entire scheme is the gradual accumulation of knowledge over time and the eventual application of that knowledge in mastering the natural environment, which in turn results in progressively greater availability of durable goods. As material culture proliferates, man is able to accumulate goods to an increasing extent. Expansion in the material realm permits his desire to maximize profits and consume conspicuously to become operative, and thus the possibility of emulating such patterns becomes real. In the relative absence of durable goods, as indicated above, the same basic desire to maximize social standing has an opposite economic effect, tending to limit productive activity.

Conspicuous giving and low-income farmers

The idea of conspicuous giving is appealing because it provides one possible key to an understanding of traditional rural societies or subgroups within such a society, going beyond the negative assumption that incentives for action are simply lacking. Although as yet there is slim evidence that an emphasis on giving of available goods, time, or advice is an important means of achieving prestige in traditional rural society or in contemporary vestiges (the low-production, low-income farming complex) of such a society it can be said that available data do not deny the suggested possibility.

Reference has already been made to evidence of generosity, hospitality, and neighborliness in accounts of traditional societies. Such references could be repeated at great length. With the exception of some data from primitive societies, however, the possibility that such generous acts might stem from other than altruistic motives has not been explored (2). As in the explication of the gemeinschaft construct, social relationships are described as ends in themselves rather than as means to some further objective—in this case, prestige. Illustrations of conspicuous sharing, such as the elaborate dishes per-

pared for and consumed at a rural church social gathering, could be cited at great length also, but illustrating the plausibility of a hypothesis is still a long way from testing that hypothesis. More direct evidence is needed.

There is also substantial evidence that negative sanctions were applied to those who attempted to accumulate wealth in the traditional rural setting. James Mickel Williams argued that this stemmed from a recognition of man's common lot in a relatively hostile environment, thus making it consistent with the stress on social relationships as ends in themselves (26). In effect a latent predisposition to accumulate wealth is seen as released when some rural people gradually moved to the city and were no longer subject to the restrictive rural social environment. Williams' argument is not radically different from a number of other accounts stressing equalitarianism as one aspect of a general emphasis on social relationships as ends in themselves. As is so often the case, the same evidence could be interpreted from a different perspective, in this case fitting easily into the general argument that human relationships may also have been valued as means to further ends, not only as ends in themselves.

The conclusion after poring over existing scanty data is, however, that no direct test of the existence or importance of conspicuous giving and its economic implications is available at present. The ideas which have been described offer one possible answer to the general question as to what motivates the low-income, low-production farmer of Pennsylvania or elsewhere. If his objective is to maximize his standing in the particular group of which he is a part by actively manipulating social relationships through extending hospitality or neighborly acts, then his apparent lack of interest in adoption of new production techniques begins to make sense. From an analytical point of view, the researcher at least does not need to equate failure to act in an economically rational manner with complete nonrationality.

Implications

Suggestions for conceptual revision cannot provide much assistance in problem solution until the ideas are tested against data from the real world. One of the most promising and inherently interesting areas for sociological research lies in the possibility of social stratification having noneconomic (and noninherited) dimensions under some circumstances. Current definitions of social class are understandably loaded with variables central to the functioning of the modern econ-

omy, but these same definitions may serve to obscure an extremely important structural dimension in a subsistence-oriented society. Certainly such structural factors as inherited family status are important, but there is no reason to believe that other factors—not inherited and open to achievement on a competitive basis—may not be operative under some circumstances. Of greatest interest in the present context would be the possibility of direct manipulation of social relationships as an important determinant of social standing.

If further study were to support the position that apparent emphasis on social relationships as ends in themselves in traditional rural societies is questionable, and that such relaiionships are in some substantial way means to further ends, the implications for action programs to bring about economic development are substantial. A rather pervasive policy implication is that direct provision of means to economic ends (in some contexts called technical assistance) may not be the best procedure. The implication is that change in the prevailing prestige determinants would have to come about first, with a subsequent increase in importance of financial incentives. This argument, if valid, is consistent with the position that goods and services must be made available if people are to be expected to increase production and profits. The availability of goods, of course, assumes a complex distribution system, which in turn depends on adequate transportation and communication. The ramifications are many, all tending to stress the importance of rather indirect approaches to bringing about increases in production.

It might be argued that today's low-production and low-income farmer lives in the midst of an industrial society and has all manner of goods available to him and that he therefore should have responded by increasing his production level if the ideas suggested have merit. Some increase in production level has taken place, of course, and perhaps for the reasons suggested, but the fact remains that productive activity has not reached desired levels. The answer to the puzzle probably lies in the realm of physical availability of goods and services versus their psychological availability. Without going into detail on this important point, it can be said that a desire to emulate, for example, does not become fully operative until the object of emulation is rather well known. The familiar "keeping up with the Joneses" implies that the Joneses are one's neighbors, they are known, and their achievements can be emulated. A further implication for action programs then may be that mere physical availability of goods and serv-

ices is not enough. The possibility of actually acquiring such goods may have to be demonstrated, to say the least. The ramifications in terms of known merchandising and credit procedures offer ample food for thought in this regard.

Literature Cited

1. Doerflinger, J. A., D. G. Marshall. The Story of Price County, Wisconsin: Population Research in a Rural Development County. *Wisc. Agr. Exp. Sta. Res. Bul. 220.* (1960).
2. Erasmus, C. J. *Man Takes Control: Cultural Development and American Aid.* Univ. of Minn. Press, Minneapolis. (1961).
3. Fliegel, F. C. Aspirations of Low-income Farmers and Their Performance and Potential for Change. *Rural Socio.,* 24:3, pp. 205-214. (1959).
4. Fliegel, F. C. Obstacles to Change for the Low-income Farmer. *Rural Socio.* 25:3, pp. 347-351. (1960).
5. Fliegel, F. C. Traditionalism in the Farm Family and Technological Change. *Rural Socio.* 27:1, pp. 70-76. (1962).
6. Ford, T. R. (ed.). *The Southern Appalachian Region.* Univ. of Ky. Press, Lexington. (1962).
7. Henderson, A. M., T. Parsons. *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization.* Oxford Univ. Press, New York, pp. 115-118. (1947).
8. Kaufman, J. J., H. J. Golatz. A Study of Areas of Chronic Unemployment in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania State University, Bureau of Business Research. (1959).
9. Kluckhohn, F. R. 1950. Dominant and Substitute Profiles of Cultural Orientations. *Social Forces,* 28:4, pp. 376-393.
10. Lionberger, H. F. Low Income Farmers in Good Farming Areas. *Mo. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bul.* 668. (1956).
11. Litwak, E. Geographic Mobility and Extended Family Cohesion. *Am. Socio. Review,* 25:3, pp. 385-394. (1960).
12. Loomis, C. P., J. A. Beegle. *Rural Social Systems.* Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York. (1950).
13. Metzler, W. H. Socioeconomic Aspects of Manpower Adjustments: Low-income Rural Areas. *Rural Socio.,* 24:3, pp. 226-235. (1959).
14. Metzler, W. H., J. L. Charlton. Employment and Underemployment of Rural People in the Ozark Area. *Ark. Agr. Exp. Sta. Bul.* 604. (1958).
15. McCann, G. C. North Carolina Rural Adjustment Studies: the Area and its People. *N. C. Agr. Exp. Sta. Proj. Rpt. Rs-36.* (1960).
16. Moran, L. J., S. D. Staniforth. Rural Development in Price County: Nature of Problem and Farm Opportunities. *Wis. Agr. Exp. Sta. Res. Bul.* 216. (1959).
17. President's Appalachian Regional Commission. *Appalachia.* U. S. Government Printing Office. (1964).
18. Riemer, S. Villagers in Metropolis. *British J. Socio.,* 2:1, pp. 31-43. (1951).
19. Reissman, L. Levels of Aspiration and Social Class. *Am. Socio. Review,* 18:3, pp. 233-242. (1953).
20. Rostow, W. W. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto.* Cambridge University Press, New York. (1960).
21. Roethlisberger, F. J., W. J. Dickson. *Management and the Worker.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge. (1949).

22. Toennies, F. (tr. by C. P. Loomis). *Fundamental Concepts of Sociology.* American Book Co., New York. (1940).
23. U. S. Bureau of the Census. *U. S. Census of Agriculture:* 1954, Vol. 1, pt. 2. U. S. Gov't. Printing Office. (1956).
24. U. S. Department of Agriculture. *Development of Agriculture's Human Resources.* U. S. Gov't. Printing Office. (1955).
25. Veblen, T. *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* The Modern Library, New York. (1934).
26. Williams, J. M. *Our Rural Heritage.* Knopf, New York. (1925).
27. Copp, J. H. (ed.) *Our Changing Rural Society: Perspectives and Trends.* Iowa St. Univ. Press, Ames. (1964).

Digest

This report is concerned with chronic poverty in agriculture and summarizes data from a low-income area in Fayette County, Pa. Its purpose is to identify some major differences among low-income farmers, and delineate that group which seems to represent the real core of the persistently poor. The bulk of the report then follows with an attempt to understand this core grouping. The very persistence of low income in certain areas suggests that conventional treatments of the problem are far from adequate. For that reason some conceptual revisions are suggested which may prove useful in gaining greater insight into chronic poverty.

The first four sections of the report are a general introduction to the study and three sections which summarize data obtained from 189 farm operators in 1957. These materials specify at least some of the great diversity among farmers who are included in the general low-income category. Five main categories of individuals stand out, with roughly equal proportions of respondents falling into each category:

(i) The aged. Many respondents included in the study were at or near retirement age. It seemed advisable to treat such respondents separately from the point of view of income needs and potential for increasing income, should an increase be deemed desirable.

(ii) The physically handicapped. Limited data made it difficult to clearly establish the nature and extent of physical handicaps among sample farm operators. It seemed clear, however, that a substantial proportion of respondents had handicaps which limited their productive potential, at least in the short run. With respect to both the aged and the handicapped it seems likely that conventional welfare programs would be more appropriate and more likely to achieve some success than would programs aimed directly at economic development.

(iii) The farm operator primarily oriented to nonfarm opportunities. Some respondents who were of working age and not physically handicapped, and who gave evidence of trying to capitalize on opportunities to increase their earnings, also gave evidence of seeing their greatest opportunities in nonfarm occupations. This is to be expected and is of immediate importance only to the extent that it points to the need for linking general economic development programs and programs concentrating on agriculture.

(iv) The farm operator oriented to commercial agriculture. This is the least problematical category in the context of contemporary agriculture, most willing and most able to benefit from programs that provide technical and material resources to increase productivity.

(v) The farm operator oriented to subsistence agriculture. Some respondents who were definitely com- *Continued on inside back cover*

Authorized for publication December 9, 1965 U.Ed. 6-302

mitted to a future in agriculture gave little evidence of adapting their farming operations to a changing economy. They can best be described as subsistence oriented, with the implication that action programs designed to increase productivity might have little meaning for them.

The last two sections of the report are devoted to the subsistence-oriented farmer, the category which seems to be least well understood. Given the fact that subsistence agriculture, perhaps a satisfactory way of life in the past, is radically inconsistent with the patterns of contemporary industrial society, the apparent orientation to an out-moded way of life was seen as characterizing a core of low-income farmers who would probably not respond to either welfare or economic development efforts and thus would perpetuate conditions of poverty.

If the contemporary subsistence-oriented farmer can be viewed as retaining certain traditional values, while having lost many traditional subsistence skills, then it becomes important to understand what these traditional values are if change is to be brought about. Accepted modes of thought in this regard tend to characterize traditional rural values in negative terms, as the absence of those key values which facilitate understanding of the dynamics of contemporary society. If rural society in the past had been completely static this would be sufficient, but such is not the case. Social change is hardly a recent invention, although rate of change may be increasing over time.

If commercial success is not highly valued, then it is not enough to simply note the fact and then proceed to ignore it in trying to stimulate greater agricultural efficiency and productivity. The present report suggests that an important element in a low-income social setting may be an emphasis on human relationships. It is suggested that human relationships may be fostered and manipulated, not only as ends in themselves, but as a means to achievement of prestige in that situation. The traditional rural emphasis on neighborliness and friendliness, from this point of view, may be important in understanding what it is that a subsistence-oriented farmer is trying to achieve.

Action programs designed to maximize profit will have little meaning for the low-income farmer if he is oriented to maximizing prestige by giving of his time and energy as well as his resources to his friends and neighbors. The implication is that it may be necessary to change a prestige orientation based on giving to one based on accumulation and consumption if modern technology and management is to be accepted and the cycle of poverty broken.